

Profile: King George VI

As the Public Record Office releases more documents concerning the abdication of King Edward VIII, BBC News Online looks at the life of his brother who took over the throne, becoming King George VI.

George VI neither desired, nor ever expected, to become King. A diffident, even painfully shy, figure who battled throughout his life with a nervous stammer, George VI was the unlikeliest of sovereigns, thrust on to the throne when his brother, Edward VIII, abdicated in 1936. Besides mastering the art of kingship and rebuilding public respect for the monarchy following the shock of the abdication he had, within three years, to lead his nation and empire into a war which became a fight for its very survival. Albert Frederick Arthur George was born on 14 December 1895. It was not an auspicious date, being the anniversary of the death of his great-grandfather, Prince Albert, consort to Queen Victoria.

His aged great-grandmother, initially upset by the coincidence, later grew to love the young Prince Albert, saying that his birth "had broken the spell of this most unlucky date". His father, who became King George V in 1910, was a harsh parent who once said of his two sons, Albert and the older Edward: "My father was scared of his father, I was scared of my father and I'm damned well going to see that they're scared of me." He oversaw a brutal regime, aimed at instilling respect, deference and acceptance of duty into the princes. Albert, naturally left-handed, was forced to write with his right hand and his legs were encased in splints to straighten his knock knees.



The young Prince Albert attended naval college

Attractive figure

At the age of 13 he was sent to naval college, where he was bullied, and eventually saw action as a junior officer at the battle of Jutland in 1916. Shy and unassuming beside the raffish figure of his brother, by now the Prince of Wales, he preferred country pursuits to the butterfly life of a socialite. Yet, despite his social handicaps, he presented an attractive figure to women. While at a ball in 1920, he met the young, outgoing and determined daughter of a minor Scottish aristocrat, Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon.

Increasingly drawn to the young woman, he wooed her for two years, enduring two unsuccessful proposals before she finally accepted. The couple, ennobled as the Duke and Duchess of York, were married in April 1923. Their eldest daughter, the present Queen, was born three years later and Princess Margaret arrived in 1930. Their close family life, though, was soon to be shattered. When King George V died in January 1936, his eldest son Edward became King.



He proposed to Elizabeth, the future Queen Mother, three times

But in less than a year he was to relinquish the throne in order to marry American divorcee Wallis Simpson, and his younger brother had to take

over. The new King, untrained for the role which he had now assumed, quickly won the respect of his ministers and his people. This was to stand him in good stead in the dark years of war which lay ahead. The failure of Neville Chamberlain's appeasement of Adolf Hitler (who dismissed George VI as "a simpleton") was complete when, on 3 September 1939, he announced that Britain was at war with Germany. The new King was now, like his father before him, a war leader.

Health problems

1940 saw the German invasion of France, Chamberlain's resignation as prime minister and his replacement by the maverick Winston Churchill. Though the King and Queen viewed the new premier with suspicion for the support which he had given to the former King during the abdication crisis, Churchill's Olympian handling of the war would eventually win the couple over. In the same year, the Blitz on London brought the British people into the frontline of the conflict. Touring the shattered East End, the King and Queen were initially greeted with boos and jeers. It was only with the bombing of Buckingham Palace and the Royal Family's refusal to leave the capital, that the mood of much of the general public became positive.



The King and Queen were initially booed when touring bomb sites

George VI's hard-working and conscientious manner eventually brought him hero status in his battered country. But victory, finally achieved in 1945, left him physically exhausted. A series of health problems, culminating in lung cancer - he was a heavy smoker - led to the King's death when he was just 56.